

THE BATTLE OF ATTU AND THE ALEUTIAN ISLAND CAMPAIGN

A Monograph

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ABSTRACT

THE BATTLE OF ATTU AND THE ALEUTIAN ISLAND CAMPAIGN, by MAJOR Matthew S. Metcalf, U.S. Army, 38 pages.

The Battle of Attu is a case study for the importance of the proper application of operational art into the planning and preparation of a major military operation. This monograph provides a succinct historical account of the events surrounding the Battle of Attu and the Aleutian Island Campaign in order to provide the strategic and operational context that shaped the American operational approach. Analysis of primary source data used includes personal accounts, media sources, and previous studies. America was successful due to its ability to organize and apply combat power by leveraging the elements of operational art; specifically, the elements of operational reach and basing. These elements led to the building of depth during the Battle of Attu which was critical to the successful outcome of the battle.

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INTRODUCTION

A soldier stood at the Pearly Gate;
His face was wan and old.
He gently asked the man of fate
Admission to the fold.
“What have you done,” Saint Peter asked,
“To gain admission here?”
“I’ve been in the Aleutians
For nigh unto a year.”
Then the gates swung open sharply
As Saint Peter tolled the bell.
“Come in,” said he, “and take a harp.
“You’ve had your share of hell.”¹

— Warrant Officer Boswell Boomhower

The Battle of Attu is a case study for the importance of the proper application of operational art into the planning and preparation of a major military operation. The battle for Attu, and the wide-ranging Aleutian Island Campaign to which it was a part, is generally unfamiliar to the contemporary American public. Yet, the Battle of Attu, and the Aleutian Island Campaign, were exclusive and unique in many ways and are worthy of contemporary study. It teaches many important lessons for today’s military professional. The overall campaign and subsequent battle for Attu demonstrates the application of operational art in sequentially distinct steps leading towards the strategic objective of ridding the Aleutians of the Japanese. America was successful due to its ability to organize and apply combat power by leveraging the elements of operational art, specifically, the elements of operational reach and basing.

The Aleutian Island Campaign was one of the first American offensive campaigns of World War II and one of the first in which the Allies were victorious. It was the only World War II campaign conducted on American soil and was the only campaign fought against the Japanese

¹Poem written by Warrant Officer Boswell Boomhower while stationed in the Aleutians during the summer of 1943. Quoted in Brian Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1969; reprint, Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1995), 143.

in Arctic conditions. Concerning airpower, the campaign witnessed one of the first far-reaching use of military airlift as well as extensive use of aerial bombing; including the first land-based aerial attacks on the Japanese homeland. Concerning naval power, the campaign witnessed the last and longest classic daylight surface battle in naval history. The unopposed Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands and subsequent occupation of Kiska and Attu was the first occupation of an enemy force, on American soil, since the War of 1812.²

The Battle of Attu occurred between the United States and the Japanese Empire, from May 11-30, 1943, on the Aleutian Island of Attu. It was one of the first uses of amphibious forces in World War II. The Battle of Attu, which began with an unopposed landing, would end with unrestrained violence. The battle ended after two weeks of heavy fighting with a Japanese *banzai* counter-attack that left almost all of the Japanese dead. It was one of the most deadly fights in the Pacific; second only to Iwo Jima, in terms of percentage of casualties versus the number of enemy fought.³

Physical Environment

One major factor that made the Battle of Attu so costly was the physical environment. The Aleutian island chain is vast and far-reaching. It consists of roughly 120 islands elongating over a 1,000 miles west from the United States' Alaskan Peninsula towards Russia and Japan. The island of Attu is the eastern limit of Alaskan territory – approximately 90 miles from Kamchatka.

²Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *The Williwaw War: The Arkansas National Guard in the Aleutians in World War* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), vii - ix.

³Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 299.

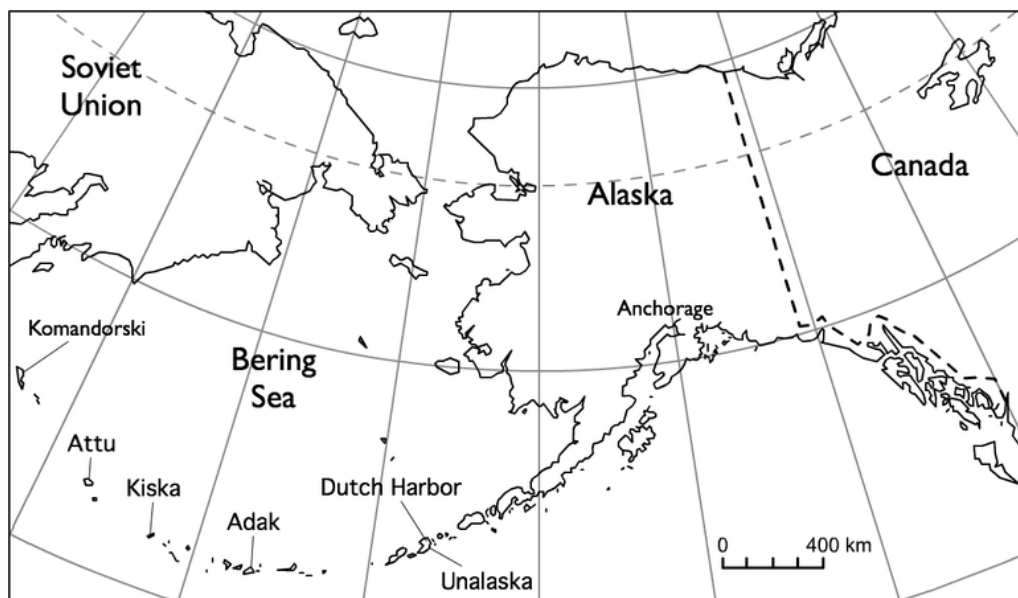


Figure 1: The Aleutian Islands

Source: Wikipedia. Reprinted from public domain,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Aleutian_Islands_map.png (accessed March 15, 2014).

The Aleutians are in the Arctic. The warmest months average below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. High winds, ice, snow, and fog cover the Aleutian Islands the majority of the time. Transportation, both by air and sea, is severely handicapped due to the weather. Visibility is minimal with navigation becoming virtually impossible. Fog blankets the inhospitable island of Attu year-round. Merely surviving the unrelenting exposure to the damp arctic conditions is challenge enough. Breath freezes instantly into icicles and exposed flesh becomes frostbitten within minutes. Touching metal with bare skin will immediately fuse them together and will require the use of a knife to separate.⁴

The fog reduces sunshine to only a few days each year and produces punishing, life-threatening overcast conditions. The fog greatly reduces visibility, which inhibits flight and

⁴Goldstein and Dillon, *The Williwaw War*, 119.

maritime operations. During the Aleutian Island Campaign, the fog kept airman from providing close air support. They were simply unable to see through the dense fog. Several pilots inadvertently crashed into the sides of mountains in an attempt to find the enemy. Without the ability to see outside their aircraft, many pilots lost their way in the fog. These unfortunate pilots would never reach home and never be found. The significantly large and lethal Army Air Corps bomber fleet was virtually useless when the fog was present and close air support was impossible.⁵

The problem of dense fog also stopped sailors from providing naval gunfire due to the obstructed view. Many rounds ineffectively hit the ground without finding their targets. During the Battle of Attu, the aircraft carrier and battle ships located off the coast were virtually useless when the dense fog was present. The Navy was unable to provide close air support or naval barrages to the soldiers on the ground. This lack of visibility due to the fog greatly affected the soldier on the ground. Direct and indirect fire was useless when soldiers were unable to see the enemy's positions and movement. The Japanese used the fog by establishing defensive positions, just above the fog line in the snowy ridges, where they had superior fields of fire and unimpeded vantage points. When the fog was present, which was most of the time, the Japanese were able to look down through the fog and observe the Americans, but the Americans could not see the Japanese when looking up into it.⁶

The harsh terrain completely controlled the 7th Infantry Division's ability to fight during the Battle of Attu. Muskeg, a type of bog, covers the lowlands of Attu. Muskeg has a hard crust that, once penetrated, will give way to men or vehicles attempting to cross over its surface and

⁵Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943-1945*, United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington, DC: United States Army, Chief of Military History, 1968), 398.

⁶Coakley and Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943-1945*, 398.

sink them into roughly three feet of water. This spongy growth makes even walking very difficult. The muskeg rendered logistical support to be a time consuming, labor intensive and grossly inefficient exercise. Supply vehicles, which sunk to their chassis while attempting to travel through the muskeg, were unable to deliver much needed supplies inland. This led to a bottleneck of supplies on the beach, making them unable to move inland to units engaged in combat.⁷

The inhospitable weather conditions and uncooperative topological environment created many challenges for the soldiers fighting on the island of Attu. These characteristics of the terrain completely dominated the 7th Infantry Division's ability to function and fight on the island during the Battle of Attu. Planners originally anticipated that the 10,000-man land force would only require three days to recapture the island from a 2,500 man Japanese force. It took three weeks. Due to this gross underestimation of how long the battle would take as well as not understanding how harshly cold the Aleutians were, soldiers were not adequately clothed for the operation; having been issued field jackets and leather boots, not parkas and snow boots. Frostbite was rampant throughout the ranks with most of the casualties stemming from exposure.

Purpose

The purpose of this monograph is two-fold. The first is to present a succinct historical account of the events surrounding the Aleutian Island Campaign, which includes the Battle of Attu to describe and explain what happened there. The second is to demonstrate that the American application of operational art was superior to that of the Japanese during the Aleutian Island Campaign and the Battle for Attu. The overall intent is to provide the strategic and

⁷Gregory J. W. Urwin, *The Capture of Attu: A World War II Battle as Told by the Men Who Fought There* (Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Press: Bison Books, 2000), xv.

operational context that shaped the American operational approach in order to determine how the operational commanders came to their decisions followed by their application of operational art.

Army doctrine defines operational art as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”⁸ The Aleutian Island Campaign and the Battle of Attu demonstrates the application of operational art in sequentially distinct steps leading towards the strategic objective of ridding the Aleutians of the Japanese. This monograph will prove that America was successful due to its ability to organize and apply combat power by leveraging the elements of operational art, specifically, the elements of operational reach and basing. Joint doctrine defines operational reach as “the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities.”⁹ Operational reach enabled basing, which U.S. Army doctrine defines as “a locality from which operations are projected or supported.”¹⁰

Achieving operational reach through the practicality of basing enabled the Americans to build depth with the force. The Aleutian Islands’ unforgiving terrain and severe weather of high winds, impenetrable fog, and frequent storms made the battle extremely difficult to support with both sustainment and joint fires. The 7th Infantry Division was capable of sustained land combat due to the overall American force operating in depth. Army doctrine defines depth as, “the extension of operations in space, time, or purpose.” A military force should attack enemy forces “throughout their depth by arranging activities across the entire operational framework to achieve the most decisive result.” Simultaneously, the force should “seek to build depth within their own

⁸Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 16 May 2012), 4-1.

⁹U.S. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 11 August 2011), II9.

¹⁰Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, 4-6.

organizations and operations in space, time, and resources.”¹¹ For the Aleutian Island Campaign and the Battle of Attu, campaign planners built enough depth that the American force was eventually victorious despite the difficulties imposed by the weather and terrain.

Sustainment

At the time of the Battle of Attu, the term “Sustainment” was not a doctrinal term as per ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*. Logistics, medical, and personnel were all separate endeavors. Today, sustainment is the provision of logistics, personnel services, and health service support necessary to maintain operations until successful mission completion. Logistics is planning and the execution of movement as well as the support of forces. Logistic support consists of maintenance, transportation, supply, field services, and distribution. Personnel services man and fund the force, maintain soldier and family readiness, promote the moral and ethical values of the nation, and enable the fighting qualities of the Army. Health service support encompasses all support and services performed, provided, and arranged by the Army Medical Department.¹²

Joint Fires

JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, defines Joint Fires as “those delivered during the employment of forces, from two or more components, in coordinated action, to produce desired results, in support of a common objective.”¹³ The components available to the 7th Infantry Division commander consisted of Air Force, Naval, and organic artillery assets. The Eleventh Air Force provided a significant amount of bomber and fighters in support of the Battle of Attu. However,

¹¹Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 10 October 2011), 8.

¹²Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 4-0, *Sustainment Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 21 July 2012), 1.

¹³U.S. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, xiv.

the large and lethal bomber fleet was virtually useless when the fog was present and close air support was impossible. Due to the close proximity of the Navy off the coast of Attu immediate fire support and close air support was always present. With her ten 14” guns, the battleship USS *Nevada* was capable of raining devastating barrages down onto the enemy. The aircraft carrier *Nassau* carried twenty-four F4 Wildcats available for close air support. However, naval fire support was subject to the weather and fog just like the Eleventh Air Force.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysis of primary source data used includes personal accounts, media sources, and previous studies. Limited sources of published information on the Battle of Attu and the overall Aleutian Island Campaign are available. Most accounts of the battle are a first-person view of specific tactical engagements designed more for entertainment rather than historical accountability. However, there are several official histories that provide an accurate portrayal of the operation: *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* by Stetson Conn (1964); *Aleutians, Gilberts, and Marshalls, June 1942–April 1944* (1964) by Samuel Eliot Morison; and *The Capture of Attu, A World War II Battle As Told by the Men Who Fought There* (1985) by Sewell Tying.¹⁴

The best single source for information regarding the Battle of Attu and the overall Aleutian Island Campaign is *The Thousand-Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (1969) by Brian Garfield. The first and only work that comprehensively depicts all aspects surrounding the campaign at all levels of warfare. Operating under the full support of the United

¹⁴Stetson Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, United States Army in World War II Series: The Western Hemisphere (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, Chief of Military History, 1964); Samuel Eliot Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls, June 1942-April 1944*, vol. 7 of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, [1951] 2001); Sewell T. Tyng, *The Capture of Attu, A World War II Battle As Told by the Men Who Fought There*, Part One. Compiled by the editors of *Infantry Journal* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], October, 1944).

States Army and Air Force, Garfield interviewed almost all of the major American actors of the campaign. He systematically deconstructed the entire campaign as well as the Battle of Attu utilizing declassified documents coupled with the personal interviews. Garfield wrote from a strategic and operational perspective that included, at times, a first-person narrative that brought the real human experience and drama of war to life.¹⁵

Section two focuses on the strategic context of the American and Japanese forces as well as the prelude and build-up to the Aleutian Island Campaign including the Battle of Attu. It explores the planning process and the application of operational art. Section three describes the actual events of the Battle of Attu – what happened. It explains the effects and outcomes of joint fires and sustainment in the overall campaign and in the battle itself. It illustrates the value of planning for and the implementation of depth into any plan. Section four provides a conclusion consisting of a summary of the analysis and relevance and application to today’s military operations.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

“He who holds Alaska holds the world...Alaska is the most strategic place in the world.”¹⁶

— BG William “Billy” Mitchell

The initial American strategy for the Aleutians intended to defend the United States from potential threats. In the 1920s, as a contingency plan in the event of a future conflict with Japan, U.S. war planners developed War Plan Orange.¹⁷ War Plan Orange assumed potential conflict would occur in Asia rather than the Western Hemisphere. The United States considered the

¹⁵Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*.

¹⁶Testimony to the House Military Affairs Committee on February 11, 1935, Quoted in Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 46.

¹⁷Countries aligned with a color. United Kingdom was Red, Mexico was Green, Germany was Black, and Japan was Orange. Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute Press, 2007), 332-346.

possibility of using the Aleutian Islands as a staging base for an invasion of Japan. As early as 1935, Billy Mitchell stated that the Aleutian Islands were a “jumping-off place to smash Japan.”¹⁸

As aviation technology improved, long-range bombing became a viable option to military tactics and strategy. It was quickly realized how important Alaska was as a strategic foothold. The potential for an enemy to launch air strikes against the United States’ west coast became much more likely if an enemy were to establish air bases in Alaska.¹⁹ If an enemy launched a long-range bomber attack from Alaska, it could strike the Boeing Aircraft Production Plant or the Bremerton Ship Yard in Seattle within three hours. While testifying before the House of Representatives Committee on Military Affairs, General William “Billy” Mitchell professed that Alaska was the foundation of the Pacific and stated that Alaska was “the most important strategic place in the world” and that whoever controls Alaska “will hold the world.”²⁰

American Strategy

In 1939, the possibility of conducting a multi-front war, against multiple adversaries, was becoming a reality. The Joint Planning Board prepared five contemporary contingency plans labeled the “Rainbow Plans”²¹ – a term used to illustrate the amalgamation of the multiple “color” plans that had been drawn up in the 1920s. The five plans discussed different possible allies, enemies, and theaters of operation in predicted future conflicts. The five plans consisted of:

1. Rainbow 1: Defense of Western hemisphere north of ten degrees latitude (Panama). No major allies.
2. Rainbow 2: Allied with France and Britain.
3. Rainbow 3: Same as the Orange plan after first securing western hemisphere.
4. Rainbow 4: Same as R1 but extended to include defense of the Western hemisphere.
5. Rainbow 5: Allied with Britain and France – provide American forces for operations in Europe, Africa, or both.

¹⁸Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 16.

¹⁹Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 224.

²⁰Stan Cohen, *The Forgotten War* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1981), 2.

²¹Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York, NY: Vintage Book, 1985), 59.

The Rainbow 5 contingency plan allied the United States with Great Britain and France while ensuring the defense of the western hemisphere. Early projection of U.S. forces to the eastern Atlantic and to either or both the African and European Continents would follow. The Pacific theater maintained a defensive posture until the Allies had some success against the Axis powers.²² This “strategic triangle” or defensive perimeter ranged from Alaska to Hawaii to Panama.²³

In 1941, American and British planners, at the American-British Conference-1, constructed a unified policy recommending the defeat of Germany first with any action against Japan being limited to defense only. The Joint Pacific Coastal Frontier Defense Plan provided the Department of War with the initial mandate of denying Japan access to Alaska and the Aleutians.²⁴ Because of this plan, funds and resources became available to construct a defensive military infrastructure that consisted of five key objectives. The first key objective is to augment the Alaska garrison. The second established a major base for Army operations near Anchorage. The third developed a network of air bases. The fourth established airfields with combat forces. Finally, the fifth objective provided troops to protect the naval installations at Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor.²⁵

Major General Simon Bolivar Buckner established the Alaska Defense Command on February 4, 1941. Having already been in command for over fifteen months of the initial 750

²²Louis Morton, “Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II,” in *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1987), 24.

²³Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*. United States Army in World War II Series: The War in the Pacific (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1962), 38.

²⁴Charles Breslin, *World War II in the Aleutians: The Fundamental of Joint Campaigns* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1994), 6.

²⁵Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 224.

soldier-strong Alaska Defense Force, General Buckner now witnessed his new command grow to over 22,000 soldiers and support troops and the Alaska defense budget grow from \$4 million to \$350 million.²⁶ He made quick use of the much needed money and resources as they surged into Alaska. Buckner ensured the timely completion of various construction projects, consisting of airfield runways, railroads, and roads. These projects improved the quality and quantity of infrastructure virtually overnight. Buckner quickly surmised that any successful defense of Alaska depended on air superiority and adequate ground troops equipped to protect the valuable infrastructure. These actions were the beginning of America's effort to develop operational reach.²⁷

Major General Buckner received two additional squadrons of modern aircraft and the Alaskan military garrisons nearly doubled in size after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He became obsessed with building forward air bases for bomber planes in western Alaska and the Aleutian chain as well as constructing auxiliary fields near the existing main bases to prevent the undue massing of aircraft with consequent danger from bombing attack. He connected the lower forty-eight states of the United States with Alaska by a linking a chain of landing fields to facilitate the movement of aircraft to and within the vast Alaskan territory. He established an aircraft warning service in anticipation of a possible attack. He also focused on maintaining a reserve of both combat and transport aircraft equipped for cold weather flying for a quick response to Alaska in an emergency.²⁸

²⁶Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 53.

²⁷Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 240.

²⁸Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 240.

Japanese Strategy

Due to the close proximity of the Aleutian Islands to the Japanese mainland, on February 6, 1922, the Japanese secured an agreement with the United States in the Treaty of Naval Limitations, which stated that the Americans would not fortify the Aleutian Islands. Because of this treaty, the United States and Japan maintained a sort of *status quo* concerning the military posture in the Aleutians. In return for the Japanese agreement of limiting the total amount of ships constructed, the United States would abstain from constructing any new air bases in the Pacific to include the Aleutian Islands. This agreement included refraining from fortifying existing bases. Despite the expiration of this treaty in 1934, the War Department did not improve or build any new facilities beyond Dutch Harbor, Alaska until after the war started.²⁹

After Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in March 1942, the Imperial General Headquarters released the “Fundamental Principles of Future Operations of the Imperial Army” which stated:

1. We shall complete the subjugation of occupied areas as soon as possible; make preparatory defensive positions; make military administration effective and insure the stability of occupied area as well as continuing to be victorious.
2. We shall continue to gain ground from those positions gained at the beginning of operations; continue to be victorious forever, we must keep AMERICA in a constantly defensive position; undertake necessary attacks against strategically important points along the outer fringe of occupied areas, specifically the ALEUTIANS Islands, MIDWAY, FIJI, SAMOA & NEW CALEDONIA in order to hasten the end of the war.³⁰

On April 18, 1942, Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle attacked Tokyo, despite Japan’s sworn promise that no enemy would be successful in attacking the homeland.³¹ The Japanese Imperial High Command needed a psychological and political victory equivalent to Doolittle’s

²⁹Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 25.

³⁰Japanese Monograph No. 88, Aleutian Naval Operation, March 1942-February 1943, translated by the U.S. Army (United States Army, Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, Office of Military History, n.d.), 1.

³¹Robert J. Johnson, “Aleutian Campaign, World War II: Historical Study and Current Perspective” (Master’s Thesis, Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1992), 45.

raid. The Imperial General Staff considered the Aleutian Islands as the only possible invasion route that the Americans could use from the north as well as the most likely location from which the enemy could launch heavy bombers. One operational plan called for the invasion of the Aleutian Islands followed by the invasions of Midway then Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia. The Imperial High Command recommended invasion of the Aleutians as soon as possible in order to counter this potential threat. On May 5, 1942, the Imperial High Command issued Naval Order Number 18, under the command of Admiral Yamamoto and in conjunction with the Imperial Army, for the execution of the Aleutian-Midway Operation plan. Admiral Yamamoto ordered his Northern Area Fleet to sail to the Aleutians and capture the islands of Attu and Kiska in order to protect the Japanese northern flank.³²

The Aleutian-Midway Operation plan stated that the object of the operation would be to capture or demolish points of strategic value on western Aleutian Islands in order to check the enemy's air and ship maneuvers in this area. The Army and Navy, in close cooperation, would invade Attu and Kiska Islands and destroy enemy installations and equipment on Adak Island.

The Japanese designed the following operational outline:

1. The Army and Navy, in close cooperation with each other, will capture Adak Island and withdraw after having demolished enemy installations and equipment. Following capture of the island, the Army troops and Navy Special Landing Forces will capture Attu and Kiska Islands respectively. They shall hold these two islands until the coming winter.
2. The Navy will provide strong support for the invasion force and at the same time employ a carrier unit to raid Dutch Harbor for the main purpose of reducing enemy air strength prior to our landing.³³

Japan considered their invasion of the Aleutians as a defensive action more than an offensive action. They never considered the Aleutians as a staging point for the eventual invasion of the United States. However, the Japanese were very concerned that the United States would

³²Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 72.

³³Japanese Monograph No. 88, 2-9.

use the Aleutians as a staging point for a northern attack against their homeland. For the Japanese, the occupation of the Aleutian Islands was a secondary effort. As a result, the Japanese did not adequately resource their gains of American territory. Months later, as the Americans prepared to reclaim the islands of Attu and Kiska; the Japanese withdrew from Kiska and minimized their defensive posture on Attu.³⁴ The Japanese focus was to harden their defensive perimeter on the Kurile Islands, which they considered as their northern territory.³⁵

On June 3, 1942, Naval Order Number 18 commenced with the attack on Dutch Harbor, Alaska. The purpose of this aerial attack was to support the physical invasion of the western Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. On June 7, 1942, under the command of Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya, approximately 2,500 troops landed unopposed on Kiska and Attu. Once the Japanese physically controlled the island of Attu, they immediately began to fortify their positions for an anticipated counter-attack by American forces. The Imperial Headquarters heralded this invasion as a great success.³⁶

Admiral Nimitz's American Naval Task Force could not prevent the Japanese from occupying the Aleutian Islands of Kiska and Attu nor would the American force be capable of removing the Japanese forces. American military planners were concerned that this lack of ability to remove the Japanese would in fact enable and empower the Japanese to seek further aggression into American territory. The American response to this threat was the continual harassment of Japanese forces in order to keep them contained.³⁷

³⁴Maurice Matlof, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944*. The United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Chief of Military History, 1959), 196.

³⁵Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, 84.

³⁶George L MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, Center of Military History Pub 72-6, 1992), 9.

³⁷Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 106.

THE ALEUTIAN ISLAND CAMPAIGN

The American reaction to the invasion of Attu and Kiska was a campaign designed to retake the Aleutian Islands. On June 11, 1942, the U.S. Army Air Corps began bombing Kiska. American planes did not bomb the island of Attu because they did not have the range to attack it. Despite the American bombardment, Japanese soldiers on Kiska were able to dig in and create a complex underground bunker system. However, Japanese air power was no match for America's growing air superiority advantage, and due to the heavy bombardment, the Japanese were unable to build an adequate runway on Kiska. Kiska became difficult to resupply by air. The Japanese found themselves in a dilemma; in order for their garrison's to receive vital supplies and reinforcements, they needed a competent air force able to counter the U.S. Army Air Corps. They needed a working runway in order to accommodate the required air force to receive the necessary supplies to build the runway.³⁸

The Imperial High Command considered the Aleutians as a less important secondary front where they could not waste vital resources. The need for naval resources was elsewhere. In late July 1942, Admiral Yamamoto had to withdraw most naval assets from the Aleutians. Without proper transport ships, resupply of the islands of Attu and Kiska was difficult by sea. Admiral Hosogaya had no effective way to deliver equipment and supplies to the islands. A combination of poor weather and inadequate logistical support from the sea severely strained Japanese resupply efforts. In addition, the occupations of Attu and Kiska, according to the original Japanese order, would only be until the winter of 1942. The Japanese considered the weather too severe for American operations. Admiral Hosogaya decided to consolidate all his forces on the island of Kiska, thus abandoning Attu for the winter.³⁹

³⁸Johnson, *Aleutian Campaign*, 91.

³⁹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 103.

The Alaska Defense Command already established several bases along the vast Aleutian Island chain. However, General Buckner could not attack the entirety of the chain; therefore, his operational reach was still limited. In late September 1942, the U.S. established a new airfield on Adak Island, enabling the U.S. Army Air Corps to attack the entire link of the Aleutian chain, including Attu.⁴⁰ The Japanese considered this as an indication of a possible northern invasion of the Japanese mainland. The Imperial Headquarters adjusted their plans by ordering that the Aleutian Islands be held through the winter. Japanese forces reoccupied the island of Attu on October 29, 1942.⁴¹

On January 22, 1943, the War Department produced a memorandum (CGS 168) which stated that the strategic objective for the Aleutians was to ensure that the islands were “as secure as may be.”⁴² Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid proposed to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt an ambitious plan to invade the islands of Kiska and Attu with an amphibious assault force. President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill approved the plan and directed the Joint Chiefs to execute the operation. The War Department assigned the 7th Infantry Division to the Alaskan Defense Command as the main assault force for the campaign.⁴³

However, with America’s priority of defeating the Axis powers in Northern Africa as well as preparing for the inevitable invasion of Europe, the War Department channeled all necessary logistical resources to enable this fight. Combined with the need to support military operations in the South Pacific, the possibility of the Alaska Defense Command receiving additional troops and supplies was unlikely. The Alaskan Defense Command only had currently

⁴⁰Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1940-1943*, United States Army in World War II Series: The War Department (Washington, DC: United States Army, Chief of Military History, 1955), 415.

⁴¹MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 12.

⁴²Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 266.

⁴³Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 194.

assigned forces for offensive actions against the Japanese. Realizing that the Alaska Defense Command did not have the adequate forces available, General Marshall authorized the 7th Infantry Division to train up for the purpose of retaking Attu.⁴⁴

The Japanese had very limited operational reach due to a lack of basing. Instead, they relied on naval convoys to reinforce and sustain the islands. This impeded the potential of the Japanese to build depth in and around the island of Attu. In late March 1943, American naval forces defeated Admiral Hosogaya while he personally led a twelve-ship convoy to resupply the Aleutian Islands. Due to this defeat, no resupply convoys reached the Aleutian Islands. They could only resupply by submarine. The Imperial High Command decided not to reinforce the Aleutian Islands, but instead chose to concentrate their attention on the South Pacific, effectively leaving the garrisons to fend for themselves. After the 7th Infantry Division invaded the island of Attu, the Imperial High Command quickly realized they could not counter the roughly 16,000 American soldiers fighting to take it back. They devised a plan to evacuate the Japanese soldiers on Attu. On May 28, 1943, the Imperial High Command ordered the evacuation of Kiska and abandoned any efforts to aid the garrison on Attu. The Japanese successfully evacuated Kiska on July 29, 1943, unbeknownst to the Americans.⁴⁵

American Operational Approach

The 7th Motorized Division had spent the past eighteen months preparing to fight in North Africa – training as a tank division in hot desert conditions, not as a light infantry amphibious force for arctic island warfare. The War Department considered the 35th Infantry Division as a replacement to the now 7th Infantry Division but stuck with the 7th Infantry

⁴⁴Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 267.

⁴⁵Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 433.

Division because it was in a “more advanced state of readiness and training.”⁴⁶ In fact, few men in the 7th Infantry Division had any experience or familiarity, let alone official training, in amphibious warfare or the Aleutian Island’s harsh weather and terrain. The 7th Infantry Division Commander, Major General Albert E. Brown, was a fifty-three-year-old South Carolinian whose last combat action had been as a major in France during World War I. He was concerned that there would not be significant time to train for the Aleutian Island Campaign. The invasion of Attu was only five weeks away – D-day would be May 7, 1943.⁴⁷

In order to mitigate this risk, on April 1, 1943, the Alaskan Defense Command Staff traveled to San Diego in order to conduct a planning conference with the 7th Infantry Division, and joint partners, all under the overall command of Vice Admiral Francis W. “Skinny” Rockwell. Attu was codenamed “Jackboot” and the overall operation labeled “Landcrab.” Major General Buckner sent his best officers to the planning conference.⁴⁸

The San Diego conference did not go well. It rapidly declined into many distracting arguments. A serious disagreement arose between Lieutenant General DeWitt and Major General Brown. This disagreement would eventually lead to Brown’s downfall. DeWitt believed that Japanese strength on Attu was so insignificant that a single regiment could take the island in only three days. Brown retorted that the actual size of the opposition was unknown and that the difficult terrain alone would hamper his men from traversing the island in less than a week. Brown stated, “It is my opinion, that General DeWitt sold a reluctant War Department on this operation by assurance of quick victory.”⁴⁹ General DeWitt did not like General Brown’s pessimism. DeWitt held to his view and was unwilling to listen to Brown. He confidentially

⁴⁶Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 194.

⁴⁷Tyng, *The Capture of Attu, A World War II Battle As Told by the Men Who Fought There*, 11.

⁴⁸Lynn D. Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing* (San Francisco, CA: Headquarters Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, 30 May 1943), 3.

⁴⁹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 196.

informed Admiral Kinkaid and General Buckner of his displeasure with having Brown as the commander of the infantry force. DeWitt tried to compel the War Department to have Brown relieved of command with the intent of placing Major General Eugene M. Landrum in command.⁵⁰

DeWitt's argument was that the infantry force commander ought to be familiar with the Aleutian Islands. In DeWitt's opinion Landrum, who was from Alaska and familiar with the Aleutian Islands, was the logical choice. However, the War Department disagreed and stated that it would not arbitrarily relieve Brown of the 7th Infantry Division. DeWitt was not pleased; he negatively influenced Kinkaid and Buckner, both Alaskans, against Brown. This tension between general officers had secondary effects on their staffs. The Alaskans viewed the 7th Infantry Division as outsiders who were unfamiliar with the terrain, climate, and whose opinions or suspicions were not welcome.⁵¹

General Buckner's troops suffered low morale and wanted to get into the fight. Buckner proposed to Admiral Rockwell and General Brown that some of his troops reinforce the 7th Infantry Division. Buckner stated, "You'll need them. The infantry will have to go in there with corkscrews to dig out the Japanese."⁵² However, Brown refused, he claimed that he had a cohesive division and did not want to disrupt the current command climate. The two generals came to a compromise in which Buckner would provide logistical support with his forces held in ready reserve at Adak.⁵³ The commanders eventually decided on Colonel Alexander's "Plan E," which divided up the invasion force into four groups: Northern Force to assault Holtz Bay,

⁵⁰Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 269.

⁵¹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 196.

⁵²Ibid., 197.

⁵³Samuel Eliot Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls, June 1942-April 1944*, vol. 7 of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, [1951] 2001), 41-42.

Southern Force to assault Massacre Bay, a reserve regiment (4th Infantry Regiment) to wait aboard ship, and the Scout Battalion to covertly infiltrate Austin Cove.⁵⁴

While at the conference, Colonel Alexander accurately predicted the challenges of the Battle of Attu. He knew that over the past months, General Buckner's Alaskan Defense Command expanded operational reach throughout the Aleutians by the establishment of bases on several islands. These bases provided sustainment and joint fires to the Aleutian Island Campaign. Naval vessels were able to defend the Aleutians and repel Japanese naval convoys as they attempted to reinforce their forces on Attu and Kiska. Army and naval bases in the Aleutian stocked large amounts of supplies in anticipation of the upcoming invasions of Attu and Kiska. Aircraft were able to attack enemy forces along the entire length of the island chain as well as prevent the Japanese from establishing a single airstrip anywhere within Aleutians. Aircraft were also able to ferry soldiers, equipment, and supplies quickly throughout the Aleutians. Using basing to increase operational reach, the Americans had successfully built depth into the campaign to retake the Aleutians. The Japanese had not.⁵⁵

However, American operational reach only went so far. Colonel Alexander knew that American forces would get supplies to the beaches of Attu. However, he also knew that the challenge would be in getting these supplies in-land, to sustain the troops, as the battle progressed. He also knew that joint fires would be mostly ineffective with limited close air support and inaccurate naval gunfire. Alexander recalled:

I pointed out that none of the needs of man (fuel, food, water) were available [on Attu and Kiska] and therefore we had an unusual set of conditions to deal with, not to mention the cold temperatures and the muskeg – muskeg that quakes, shivers, and gives way under the weight of a man, let alone wheeled vehicles. I emphasized the utter futility of trying to conduct an operation along conventional lines.

⁵⁴Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing*, 5.

⁵⁵Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 279-280.

Two factors were important: fire support and supply. Artillery, I assumed, had to be of sufficient caliber to reach the high peaks from the beaches on which it was landed – moving it forward would be ridiculous because of the muskeg. The 105mm howitzer filled these requirements but it took me quite a bit of desk pounding to convince the artillery officers that the 75mm pack howitzer, which they offered, was as good as no artillery at all...

As for supply, I kept in mind that an infantryman equipped for combat could, with luck, make 1½ miles an hour, unopposed, over terrain of that sort. And for every soldier engaged in combat there must be two to carry supplies—one going and one coming from the front line. We could not do it with wheels and tracks, so we would have to do it with manpower, the quantity of which would be determined by the distance from the beach to the front lines.⁵⁶

The disagreement between the general officers obscured one major limitation of the campaign: supply. General DeWitt oversaw the supplying and equipping of the 7th Infantry Division and for the taking of Attu. However, DeWitt's supply depot did not have the necessary stock and supplies to prepare the 7th Infantry Division for the arctic environment. The army's winter provisions were in England for the approaching Normandy invasion of Europe. The 7th Infantry Division would not have time to procure much-needed cold-weather clothing due to the Army's misperception that the Pacific Theater did not require cold-weather gear, but instead, tropical gear.⁵⁷

As the taking of Attu transpired, most of the men of the 7th Infantry Division suffered for this lack of logistical preparedness. In amphibious operations, the simultaneous landing of supplies with soldiers is paramount. The troops must have immediate access to resupply in order to maintain the initiative. However, during amphibious training the 7th Infantry Division only simulated the actual off-loading of supplies. This simulation led to two major unidentified shortfalls. One, the potential for men and supplies to become bottlenecked on the beach, and two,

⁵⁶Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 195.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 198.

the assumption that supplies would be able to be transported by truck inland, which the terrain of Attu and Kiska would not allow.⁵⁸

The clothing issued to the men proved to be completely unsatisfactory for the extreme arctic conditions of Attu. The clothes were neither warm enough nor waterproof. Army logisticians stocked parkas and Kersey-lined cold weather trousers in order to keep the soldiers warm, however, they were not issued to the men. The boots issued were also not warm enough nor waterproof, unsuitable for soldiers standing for hours in pools of near freezing water. As a result, many soldiers on the Island of Attu suffered from exposure and trench foot – resulting from immersion. Despite the eventual victory at the Battle of Attu, the 7th Infantry Division suffered many needless casualties.⁵⁹

Prelude to Attu

On April 24, 1943, the 7th Infantry Division set sail on five overcrowded transports for the Aleutian Islands. Ready or not, Operation Landcrab had begun. Approximately a week later, on May 1, 1943, the 7th Infantry Division joined the rest of the assault force in Cold Bay, Alaska. The Alaska Defense Command attached the Alaska Scouts to the 7th Infantry Division. The division promptly dispersed the scouts throughout the force. At Adak, General Buckner's 4th Infantry Regiment boarded ship and awaited orders. Naval gunfire would be provided by the *Nevada*, *Idaho*, and *Pennsylvania* supported by six cruisers, nineteen destroyers, and the aircraft carrier *Nassau*. On May 3, 1943, Task Force 51's thirty-four ships departed Cold Bay enroute for the Island of Attu. The force arrived at Attu on May 6, 1943. However, rough seas prevented the invasion from launching on May 7, 1943 as scheduled.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Tyng, *The Capture of Attu*, 11.

⁵⁹Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing*, 46.

⁶⁰MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 12.

Meanwhile, Colonel Yasuyo Yamazaki expected an imminent attack from the Americans. Realizing that he could not protect every possible landing point on the island, Colonel Yamasaki pulled his 2,650 men back from the beaches. He believed that he would not be able to stop a resolute invasion. His only hope was to delay the total and complete capture of Attu and wait for reinforcements to arrive. Yamasaki made his stronghold in the mountains, just above the fog, in the snowy ridges where he would have superior fields of fire and unimpeded vantage points.⁶¹ From this point, he would be able to observe the Americans, but they would not see him. He sheltered his forces inside the hardened bunkers and tunnels they constructed. Colonel Yamazaki knew that in the mountains he would be close to his supplies, as opposed to the Americans, who would be far away from their supplies on the beaches. He wanted the enemy to come to him.⁶²

THE BATTLE OF ATTU

The Battle of Attu officially began on Tuesday, May 11, 1943. The battle would take place on the eastern half of Attu. General Brown's plan adhered to Colonel Alexander's "Plan E" which divided the invasion force into four groups: Northern Force, Southern Force, the Scout Battalion, and a reserve regiment. The scheme of maneuver called for Northern Force, commanded by Colonel Frank L. Culin, to assault Beach Red followed by movement inland towards Moore Ridge. The Scout Battalion, commanded by Captain William H. Willoughby, was to land on Beach Scarlet, a beach in Austin Cove west of Holtz Bay. The battalion's mission was to flank the Japanese in order to prevent them from retreating into the western mountains of Attu. General Brown's plan was to isolate the Japanese force on the eastern side of Attu. He wanted to keep the Japanese from moving to the western side of the island and prolonging the battle. The Scout Battalion would prevent the Japanese from moving west. After preventing the Japanese

⁶¹Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 288.

⁶²MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 18.

from prolonging the battle by buttressing within the western mountains, the Scout Battalion was to unite with the Northern Force in the Holtz Valley just inland of the Western Arm of Holtz Bay.⁶³

Southern Force, commanded by Colonel Edward P. Earle, was to assault Massacre Bay at Beach Yellow and Beach Blue, followed by movement towards Jarmin Pass where it was to link-up with Northern Force. Southern Force and Northern Force would then synchronize their efforts. Once the Americans seized Jarmin Pass they would push the remaining Japanese northeast into the Chichagof Harbor where their backs would be to the sea. General Brown planned to sweep the Japanese force into Chichagof Harbor where they would have no option but to surrender.⁶⁴

The 4th Infantry Regiment was to remain onboard ship as a ready reserve. The regiment's two battalions were aboard ship postured off the coast of Adak. If needed, they could be on Attu within two or three days. However, General Brown doubted he would need the 4th Infantry Regiment. Due to an extensive network of bases throughout the Aleutians, the Americans were successful in achieving operational reach that enabled the building of depth. General Brown believed he had more than enough depth with the 7th Infantry Division. The 16,000-strong assault force included three infantry regiments, four artillery battalions, and two combat engineer battalions.⁶⁵

⁶³Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls*, 41-42.

⁶⁴MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 17-18.

⁶⁵D. Colt Denfeld, *Builders and Fighters, US Army Engineers in World War II* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), 370.



Figure 2: The Island of Attu

Source: United States Army Center of Military History. Reprinted from public domain http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Capture_of_Att_u_1943.jpg (accessed March 15, 2014).

Landing and Movement to Contact

The Scout Battalion disembarked from the submarines *Nautilus* and *Narwhal* and paddled the 5,000 yards towards Beach Scarlet.⁶⁶ Two hours later, they arrived. As they moved inland, they remained unopposed by the Japanese. The battalion's mission was to linkup with

⁶⁶Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing*, 6.

Northern Force while preventing the Japanese from retreating into the western mountains of Attu. The Scout Battalion moved in a southeasterly direction, quickly crossing over the western mountains of Attu. The Japanese were orientated to the east with the Scout Battalion “behind” them. During the night, the Japanese had reinforced the mountain ridges overlooking Holtz Bay from the west, prepared to repel an attack from the Northern Force. They were not expecting a battalion sized force to be behind them or near them and within striking distance.⁶⁷

Northern and Southern Forces landed on Attu unopposed.⁶⁸ The beach masters quickly organized arriving men and materials, got them off the beach, and directed them towards the interior of the island. Due to the difficult terrain as well as the lack of coordination and overall confusion on the beach, supplies moved inland slowly. It was not until the afternoon that some units received food and ammunition.⁶⁹

The Southern Force began to move the artillery inland shortly after arriving. However, the howitzers became hopelessly stuck in the mud and were unable to move, just as Colonel Alexander predicted during the planning conference in San Diego. Even though the 105mm howitzers were stuck on the beach, artillerymen traversed the guns and pointed them towards the ridges where the Japanese were most likely located. The Japanese watched the Americans land at Massacre Bay. They could see the Americans through the fog but the Americans could not see them. They patiently waited for the Americans to come within range while machine gun platoons and mortar platoons prepared their weapons.⁷⁰

Northern Force made its first contact with the enemy on Beach Red. American soldiers killed two Japanese scouts; however, two additional scouts escaped and reported the information

⁶⁷Tyng, *The Capture of Attu*, 13.

⁶⁸Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls*, 43.

⁶⁹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 20.

⁷⁰Tyng, *The Capture of Attu*, 17.

to their superiors. Japanese artillery began falling onto Beach Red within thirty minutes. The Americans, however, had quickly relocated to high ground above Holtz Bay. Colonel Hartl called for a barrage of naval gunfire from the destroyer *Phelps* followed by close air support from the aircraft carrier *Nassau*. Hartl pushed Northern Force uphill through heavy gunfire attacking the Japanese defenses and successfully overrunning the enemy's first line of defense. However, the Japanese quickly regrouped and counter-attacked, but Northern Force was able to drive the enemy back. Hartl sent a message to General Brown stating, "Have captured last high ground before West Arm of Holtz Bay. Now fighting hand to hand to hold it." From this point on, Northern Force would only gain ground inch by inch in bloody conflict.⁷¹

Southern Force had moved a mile and a half into Attu's interior but had to stop the advancement at Jarmin Pass due to heavy and accurate machine gun and mortar fire from enemy positions in the ridges above them. The Japanese defense entrenchments were located on the slopes of Black Mountain, which overlooked and divided Jarmin Pass from Zwinge Pass. These positions dominated the Southern Force's right flank. From this vantage point, the Japanese completely controlled the two passes with rifle and machine gun plunging fire. There would be no cover or concealment for the Southern Force as they slowly maneuvered through the thick muskeg. In addition, Japanese sniper positions controlled the western rim of the valley overseeing the Southern Force's left flank. Southern Force attempted to break the enemy lines but was unsuccessful.⁷²

When the fog began to lift, Southern Force soldiers, along with U.S. Navy advanced spotters, called for fire on the Japanese positions they could identify.⁷³ The USS *Nevada* bombarded the entrenched enemy on the ridges above Massacre Valley with her massive 14-inch

⁷¹Quoted in Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 215 - 219.

⁷²MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 20.

⁷³Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing*, 45.

guns. When the projectiles found their target, the destruction was staggering. Lieutenant Hubert Long, who observed the effects of the naval gunfire said, “Dead Japanese, hunks of artillery, pieces of guns, and arms and legs rolled down out of the fog on the mountain.”⁷⁴ Despite the temporary effectiveness of the naval barrage, the Americans were at a standstill. Like Northern Force, Southern Force would only obtain gains by a hard fight. It faced a resolute enemy. The difficult terrain negatively affected supply and the harsh weather made joint fires largely ineffective. Southern Force stalled where it was until May 17, 1943.⁷⁵

Commander’s Assessment and Solution

General Brown and his division staff had setup a headquarters at the base of Massacre Valley with communications extended over a mile inland. At this time, General Brown had approximately 25% of the 7th Infantry Division on the Island of Attu. He had 400 men of the Scout Battalion in the mountains, 1,500 men of Northern Force overlooking Holtz Bay, and 2,000 men of Southern Force with him at Massacre Bay. The initial assault forces had arrived safely on the island and made significant strides towards their respective objectives. However, the farther inland General Brown’s forces penetrated the more difficult it would be for him to resupply them. Already soldiers had to be taken off the line and sent back to retrieve supplies on foot. Each soldier hand carried supplies forward.⁷⁶ The process was tedious, slow, and an inefficient use of manpower, but vitally necessary. The units most forward would not receive food, water, or ammunition until the next day, over twenty-four hours after the Battle for Attu had begun.⁷⁷

To make matters worse, Colonel Earle’s command post radio stopped working. He needed to gain situational understanding and decided to conduct a tour of the front. During the

⁷⁴Quoted in Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 216.

⁷⁵Tyng, *The Capture of Attu*, 19 -21.

⁷⁶Smith, *Preliminary Report on Attu Landing*, 45.

⁷⁷Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 215-216.

tour, a Japanese machine gunner shot and killed Colonel Earle. General Brown immediately ordered his Chief of Staff, Colonel Wayne C. Zimmerman, to assume command of Southern Force. Colonel Stewart, of the Alaska Defense Command took over as the 7th Infantry Division chief of staff.⁷⁸

All American forces on the island of Attu were mired, not only by the enemy but also by the weather and terrain. Fifty-six Americans, including Colonel Earle, were dead. Things were not going as planned. General Brown assessed the shortfalls and determined the solutions. The first shortfall was the inability to move supplies to the front. Brown's solution was for the engineers to build a hasty road from Massacre Bay inland in order to send supplies forward. With the engineers not knowing the situation on Attu, General Brown wanted to ensure that they came fully prepared for the task. He further requested that the engineers have enough fuel and equipment on hand to last up to sixty days.⁷⁹

The second shortfall was the inability to use joint fires as a force multiplier in destroying the enemy. The Southern Force was encountering fierce resistance at Jarmin Pass. Seizing the pass was crucial to the taking of Attu. However, it did not appear that Southern Force would be able to take it without a force multiplier.⁸⁰

General Brown knew he needed depth on the Island of Attu. The establishment of bases throughout the length of the Aleutian Island chain enabled the ability to build depth. His solution was threefold. One, he would immediately land the remainder of the 7th Infantry Division on Attu. He had two battalions in reserve (not to be confused with the 4th Infantry Regiment in ready reserve off the coast of Adak) on the transport ships of *Grant* and *Chirikoff*. He planned to land one battalion with Northern Force and one battalion with Southern Force in order to build their

⁷⁸Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 291-292.

⁷⁹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 231.

⁸⁰Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 292.

combat capability. Secondly, he planned for Northern Force to cut-off the Japanese at Jarmin Pass from their main force in and around Chichagof Valley. Thirdly, he planned to employ the 4th Infantry Regiment (the ready reserve). He felt that overwhelming the enemy by sheer mass, provided by depth, would be the force multiplier required to loosen the Japanese hold of Jarmin Pass.⁸¹

Relief of Command

Major General Brown had sent three messages to Admiral Rockwell attempting to inform him of the current situation as well as to request the landing of the two reserve battalions from *Grant* and *Chirikoff*. Brown received no replies to his communications due the radio's lack of ability to handle the harsh Aleutian weather. Ironically, communication troubles between General Brown and Admirals Kinkaid and Rockwell would contribute to General Brown's eventual relief of command as the 7th Infantry Division Commander.⁸²

General Brown's superior, Admiral Kinkaid, whom he had never met and who was several hundred miles away on Adak, did not understand the situation on the ground. Due to operational security, communication between Attu and Adak was very limited. Admiral Kinkaid looked to Admiral Rockwell, who was off the coast of Attu, to provide him with information that Rockwell did not have. General Brown had in fact sent a detailed report that explained everything that was happening on Attu. The report also included his assessment of the situation and solutions to the shortfalls. Unfortunately, the report never made it to Admiral Rockwell because the dispatch aircraft crashed into the sea. The impression was that Brown did not care to keep his boss informed of the situation on the ground. Over the course of the battle, Brown had requested more troops, supplies, and assets than originally estimated. Admiral Kinkaid wondered why

⁸¹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 219.

⁸²MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 17.

Brown requested more troops, supplies and assets than initially forecasted. He wondered why the Battle for Attu was taking so long and not the three days that Lieutenant General DeWitt claimed it should take. He was especially concerned about why Brown had requested the engineers with enough fuel and construction supplies for sixty days. Had Brown gone into a defensive posture?⁸³

Lieutenant Generals Buckner and DeWitt, who disliked Brown, were with Admiral Kinkaid on Adak. DeWitt took this opportunity to strike, recommending to Kinkaid that, "If Brown lacks aggressiveness he should be replaced."⁸⁴ General Buckner guessed that General Brown simply did not understand the Aleutian environment and put forth his man, Major General Eugene Landrum. Admiral Kinkaid looked at the information available and weighed the advice given him by his Army peers. However, he was in command and made a decision. Vice Admiral Kinkaid relieved Major General Brown of command on May 16, 1943. Major General Eugene Landrum assumed command on the same day.⁸⁵ Ironically, as this was happening Northern Force made significant gains against the enemy. The remainder of the 7th Infantry Division had landed at Holtz Bay as General Brown ordered. The reinforced Northern Force was able to push the Japanese away from Holtz Bay. This effectively broke the deadlock on Attu.⁸⁶

Basing, Operational Reach, and Depth

General Landrum did not change anything in General Brown's plan. Landrum maintained the same force array and scheme of maneuver. He even maintained Brown's request for additional troops, supplies, and assets. He agreed with Brown's assessment that depth would be the critical factor in overcoming the enemy. The 4th Infantry Regiment arrived as requested. By May 20, 1943, D+9, the American forces on Attu numbered at approximately 16,000 men, with

⁸³MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 20-22.

⁸⁴Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 231.

⁸⁵Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls*, 48.

⁸⁶Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 293.

3,500 in the front lines. The Americans had suffered 1,100 casualties, almost half to exposure. Supply was still a problem and joint fires were still only effective when the fog lifted, but General Brown's plans were still in action. He planned to extend operational reach deeper into Attu Island by having the engineers construct a road inside a dry riverbed, where the soil was hard, in order to bring supplies and artillery forward from the crowded beaches of Massacre Bay.⁸⁷

Due to basing, the Americans had extended operational reach from the west coast of the United States to the Island of Attu and completely dominated the entirety of the Aleutian Islands. Japanese forces on Attu were isolated to an ever-decreasing area of operation. The Americans had depth with an unimpeded access to resupply and reinforcements. The Japanese did not. Behind the individual American soldier was a vast support system designed to ensure victory whereas behind the individual Japanese soldier was a miniscule support effort that ensured defeat. The number of personnel in the 7th Infantry Division steadily increased while the Japanese force was rapidly decreasing.⁸⁸

The Japanese force, numbering fewer than 2,000 men, withdrew to the steep ridges over Chichagof Harbor. Jarmin Pass was isolated completely. In anticipation of this, the Japanese had withdrawn their forces that defended Jarmin Pass and occupied the mountain Point Able. Empowered by Admiral Kinkaid, Colonel Eareckson was now responsible for coordinating all air strikes, both Air Force and Navy, with ground operations in order to prevent fratricide and improve effectiveness. He procured a two-set, single engine, Navy Kingfisher to coordinate forward air support. The Kingfisher was the only aircraft nimble enough to fly among the

⁸⁷Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 237-38.

⁸⁸Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls*, 50.

mountains. He refined the procedures that future generations would call “Forward Air Control.” He effectively guided in Air Force and Navy aircraft onto target.⁸⁹

The Counter-attack

The combined American strength of overwhelming manpower, artillery barrages, and close air support began to erode the Japanese defenses. Colonel Yamazaki saw his defensive area drastically shrink. This allowed him to concentrate his men and firepower, thus making him harder to dislodge. However, he was on borrowed time. With no resupplies or reinforcements from Japan, he was alone. It was only a matter of time before the Americans would root him out of his fighting positions and complete the conquest of Attu.⁹⁰

Colonel Yamazaki and his men knew his situation was hopeless. Yamazaki had approximately 800 men remaining against an American force of over 16,000. There was no hope of resupply or reinforcement. He had hoped that Admiral Kawase’s fleet of I-boats would be able to evacuate him and his men. However, they could not get through the American blockade. He was completely isolated with no hope of winning. The Americans would quickly discover that the Japanese would rather die than violate the *Bushido* code of honor, which demanded victory or death.⁹¹ Colonel Yamazaki knew he could withdraw further into the eastern mountains and prolong the fight for a few more days, until he ran out of food and ammunition. However, that plan would just delay the inevitable. He knew that it could be advantageous to attack in depth. If he could get to the American artillery and supplies, he might be able to hold out long enough for the Japanese fleet to rescue him and his men. Instead of continuing a lengthy defense that was

⁸⁹Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 240.

⁹⁰MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 22.

⁹¹Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 294.

certain to end in defeat, Colonel Yamazaki decided on a bolder course of action. He would attack.⁹²

The Battle of Attu, which began with an unopposed landing, would end with unrestrained violence. Colonel Yamazaki ordered his wounded to commit suicide. Many needed assistance from their comrades. He then consolidated all his men and began to move silently forward towards the American line. They easily overpowered a three-sentry guard post, slipping downhill through the line, and moved to the base of engineer hill. Their objective was the American artillery pieces at the top of the hill. As they came to the bottom of engineer hill, they discovered the unguarded field hospital, which was clearly marked with the International Red Cross. Screaming “Banzai!” they ransacked the hospital and killed any Americans they came across with the bayonet or sword. Many American wounded were killed while they lay in bed.⁹³

At the top of the hill, the 50th Engineers quickly realized what was happening and prepared for action. They formed up into a defensive position at the crest of the hill. Within minutes over 800 Japanese attacked up the hill with bayonets attached.⁹⁴ Most of the engineers were able to get a few rounds off before the Japanese made it to the top. Instead of running away from the Japanese, the engineers climbed to their feet and met them. The fighting was bloody and savage. The Americans pushed the Japanese back despite being greatly outnumbered.⁹⁵

The Japanese retreated to the base of the hill and regrouped. Colonel Yamazaki prepared his men for another attack. While he was doing so, the 13th Engineers, who were close by, reinforced their comrades on the hilltop. When the Japanese attacked again, they did not even make it to the crest of the hill. The survivors returned to the bottom of the hill where the majority

⁹²Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 251.

⁹³Howard Handleman, *Bridge to Victory: The Story of the Reconquest of the Aleutians* (New York, NY: Random House, 1943), 264.

⁹⁴Conn, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 294-295.

⁹⁵MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Islands*, 23.

committed suicide by clutching hand grenades to their chest. Over 500 Japanese Soldiers lay dead at the bottom of Engineer Hill.⁹⁶ The Battle of Attu was over.

CONCLUSION

The Aleutian Island Campaign and the Battle of Attu teaches many important lessons for today's military professional. It demonstrates the importance of the proper application of operational art into the planning and preparation of a major military operation. The American application of operational art was superior to that of the Japanese during the Aleutian Island Campaign and the subsequent Battle for Attu. The battle demonstrates the application of operational art in sequentially distinct steps leading towards the strategic objective of ridding the Aleutians of the Japanese. America was successful due to its ability to organize and apply combat power by leveraging the elements of operational art, specifically, the elements of operational reach and basing. Basing enabled the Americans to establish depth within the force. Depth was the key factor in the 7th Infantry Division's ability to overcome the shortfalls encountered on Attu by extending operational reach.

American strategic planners of the Joint Planning Board developed "Rainbow" contingency plans, which started the process towards the establishment of the Joint Coastal Frontier Defense Plan. This in turn resulted in the allocation of funds and resources to begin construction of a defensive military infrastructure under the control of the newly formed Alaskan Defense Command. The United States quickly linked the lower forty-eight states with Alaska via a chain of airfields to facilitate the rapid movement of men and supplies. The eventual establishment of bases (basing) throughout the length of the Aleutian Islands enabled the Americans to build operational reach and depth throughout the operational environment.

⁹⁶Garfield, *The Thousand-Mile War*, 256-57.

The Japanese Imperial General Staff considered the Aleutian Islands as the only possible invasion route that the Americans could use from the north as well as the most likely location from which the enemy could launch heavy bombers. They considered their invasion of the Aleutians as a defensive action more than an offensive action. They never considered the Aleutians as a staging point for a possible invasion of the United States. However, the Japanese were very concerned that the United States would use the Aleutians as a staging point for a northern attack against their homeland.

The Alaskan Defense Command had expanded operational reach throughout the Aleutians by the establishment of bases on several islands. These bases provided sustainment and joint fires to the Aleutian Island Campaign. Naval vessels were able to defend the Aleutians and repel Japanese naval convoys as they attempted to reinforce their forces on Attu and Kiska. Army and naval bases in the Aleutian stocked large amounts of supplies in anticipation of the upcoming invasions of Attu and Kiska.

American warplanes began to bomb Kiska but could not bomb Attu because they did not have the range to attack it. Eventually, the Americans established a new airfield on Adak Island, giving American warplanes the ability to attack the entire length of the Aleutian chain, including Attu. The campaign quickly demonstrated the advantages of basing warplanes close to the fight. Aircraft were able to attack enemy forces along the entire length of the island chain as well as prevent the Japanese from establishing a single airstrip anywhere within the Aleutians. Aircraft were also able to ferry soldiers, equipment, and supplies quickly throughout the Aleutians. The Americans had achieved operational reach. Using basing to increase operational reach, the Americans had successfully built depth into the campaign to retake the Aleutians.

Japanese air power was no match for America's growing air superiority advantage, and due to the heavy bombardment; the Japanese were unable to build an adequate runway on Kiska. An airfield on Kiska would have allowed the Japanese to base warplanes in relatively close

proximity to Dutch harbor, which may have expelled the Americans before the Aleutian Island Campaign had a chance to begin. This action alone could have changed the entire dynamics of the Aleutian Island Campaign. The Japanese did not build operational reach and were unable to establish depth within the force.

The operational planners at the 7th Infantry Division's planning conference in San Francisco accurately predicted the challenges of the Battle of Attu. The planners knew that operational reach only went so far. The terrain and weather hampered the American's ability to apply joint fires and sustainment. American forces would be able to transport supplies to the beaches of Attu but getting these supplies inland would be time consuming and inefficient due to the terrain. Joint fires would be mostly ineffective when the fog was present with limited close air support and naval gunfire.

Major General Brown overcame these challenges because the Americans built depth on Attu. He specifically addressed these shortfalls by applying personnel and material resources to the problem. Depth enabled him to do this. His solution was simple. He landed the entirety of the 7th Infantry Division as well as the 4th Infantry Regiment (the ready reserve). He knew that overwhelming the enemy by sheer mass would be the force multiplier required to expel the Japanese from Attu.

The success of American forces during the Battle of Attu and the larger Aleutian Island Campaign owed its ability to organize and apply combat power by leveraging the elements of operational art; specifically, the elements of operational reach and basing. Achieving operational reach through the practicality of basing enabled the Americans to build depth within the force. Depth was the critical factor for the American victory during the Battle of Attu. Operational planners built enough depth that the American force was eventually victorious despite the difficulties imposed by the weather and terrain.

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